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On the races of the Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* wintering in south-eastern Africa

by P. A. CLANCEY

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Rudebeck (1963) has recently endeavoured to review our present knowledge of the races of the Holarctic Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* (Linnaeus) occurring during the period of the northern winter in Africa south of the Cunene and Zambesi Rivers, from which general area two forms are currently admitted, viz., *N. p. phaeopus* (Linnaeus), 1758: Sweden, usually considered to be of general disposition, and *N. p. alboaxillaris* Lowe, 1921: Inhambane district, Moçambique, believed known from within present limits only on the basis of the original material taken in Portuguese East Africa. Unfortunately, Rudebeck worked on notes taken from skins in the Transvaal Museum collection many years prior to the preparation of his note, and did not have later access to the material, all of which was collected over half a century ago.

The series of Whimbrels in the Durban Museum collection is comparatively fresh, several having been taken within recent years, and study of this assemblage throws much light on the question of the races occurring in South Africa, showing that three races occur within South African limits in the east.

Apart from several examples of the nominate race taken in Durban Bay, Natal, in the months of December, March and April, two specimens of the much disputed *N. p. alboaxillaris*, a ♂ and ♀ taken on 27th December, 1961, are included in our series. Originally believed to have its breeding grounds on the south-east African coast and the Mascarene Islands, *N. p. alboaxillaris* is now known to nest on the steppes lying between the lower reaches of the Volga and Ural Rivers, to the north of the Caspian in Kazakhstan, U.S.S.R. (see Dementiev and Gladkov (1960)).

N. p. alboaxillaris is slightly paler on the upper parts and wings than *N. p. phaeopus*, the scapulars and tertials rather more edged with whitish, and the rump and upper tail-coverts are white, only the longest of the last named with reduced transverse barring. On the under parts whiter than the nominate race, the ventral streaking more restricted to the lower throat and upper breast, the lateral surfaces approaching plain white, while the axillaries and under wing-coverts are white without the transverse sepia barring of other races, the dark areas reduced to fine mesial streaks. The two specimens from Natal represent the first records of the race concerned for the Republic of South Africa, and are the most southerly examples of the race yet taken. The finding of these skins in our collection confirms Rudebeck's prediction that this form would be found to the south of Moçambique.

In addition to the specimens allocated to *N. p. phaeopus* and *N. p. alboaxillaris*, a specimen showing the diagnostic characters of a third race requires to be considered. A male in its first year taken on 12th October, 1961, in Durban Bay has the white surface of the back and rump densely

freckled and streaked with light sepia, these markings merging imperceptibly into the speckling and transverse barring on the upper tail-coverts. On the under parts, the ground to the throat and breast streaking tends to be browner than in *N. p. phaeopus*, and the transverse barring of the lateral surfaces, including the flanks, is also more intense, while the axillaries are heavily transversely barred with sepia. Unfortunately, the specimen concerned is in full moult, but gives the following measurements: wing (flattened) 214, exposed culmen 76, tail 90 mm. It has been carefully compared with specimens of *N. p. variegatus* (Scopoli), 1786: Luzon, Philippines, from China, Sarawak and the Solomons sent out from the British Museum (Natural History). The specimen from Durban is exactly matched in the extent of the white back and rump speckling and axillar barring by a 3rd December, 1956 ♀, *N. p. variegatus* from Batang Salak, Sarawak, and a 5th May, 1911 ♀ from Wei-hai-wei, China, and is only a little less speckled than in a ♂ from Malau Paina Island, Solomons, dated 1st April, 1934. A fourth *N. p. variegatus* from the British Museum collection, a ♂ from Shanghai, China, dated May 1898, is in more abraded dress than the others, the mantle feathers quite eroded, and has the entire white back, rump and upper tail-coverts densely speckled and transversely barred with sepia. In the light of these observations, I attribute the 12th October, 1961, specimen from Durban to *N. p. variegatus*. This race has not been suspected of reaching Africa during its non-breeding peregrinations, not being listed by Sclater (1924–1930) and later authors.

Ridgway (1919) defined the characters of *N. p. variegatus* when compared with *N. p. phaeopus* as ‘rump always more or less (sometimes heavily) spotted; axillars more heavily and extensively barred; size averaging smaller (wing averaging 227 in male, 237.7 in female; exposed culmen 73 in male, 78.8 in female; tarsus 55.5 in male, 56.2 in female)’. The specimens of *N. p. variegatus* available from the eastern wintering grounds (localities given above) are not smaller, and if anything range a little larger than in our *N. p. phaeopus*, having wings in 2 ♂♂ 241, 251, exposed culmens 82.5, 84, tails 95.5, 100; 2 ♀♀ wings 247.5, 253.5, culmens 82, 92.5, tails 97, 98 mm. I suspect Ridgway’s measurements are of unflattened wings. The wings of 7 ♂♂ of *N. p. phaeopus* available to me measure 222–245.5 (234.0), culmens 77–84 (80.0), tails 95–102 (98.2), while a single ♀ has a wing of 242.5, culmen 81, tail 98 mm. Though the material at hand in Durban is not sufficient to make any worthwhile pronouncement, I believe that the range of size-variation within both *N. p. phaeopus* and *N. p. variegatus* is such that this variable is of doubtful use for the determination of the races concerned, and the pygal and axillar characters are, in my view, much more definitive.

The breeding range of *N. p. variegatus* seems not to be in contact with the eastern populations of *N. p. phaeopus*, judging by the valuable range map in Voous (1960), and is situated in eastern Siberia from about the Lena River eastwards, and the form winters in southern and eastern Asia, south through the islands of the Sunda Chain and Philippines to New Guinea and neighbouring and western Pacific archipelagoes and Australasia (after Peters, 1934). Occasionally to the eastern seaboard of Africa (Natal once).

Arising from this study of the material of the Whimbrel from Natal in the collection of the Durban Museum, it can be concluded that three races

occur in the non-breeding season in the bays and estuaries of south-eastern Africa, these being *N. p. phaeopus*, *N. p. alboaxillaris* and *N. p. variegatus*. The first named is plentiful, while the second, which has a restricted breeding range in comparison with the first, is probably more general than the circumscribed records from Moçambique and Natal suggest, while the last named is almost certainly of rather irregular occurrence, the main wintering grounds being further to the east than Africa. Recently, *Calidris ruficollis* (Pallas), which also breeds in eastern Siberia and has not hitherto been suspected of occurring in Africa, has also been taken in Durban Bay, Natal (Clancey, 1964).

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A further note on the egg of the Red-chested Cuckoo *Cuculus solitarius* Stephens

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I referred ⁽¹⁾ to an egg of *Cuculus solitarius*, found in Southern Rhodesia, which was not the usual coffee colour, but was pale green marked with a few rusty-brown spots, some of them very pale and very small; and from which a Red-chested Cuckoo eventually hatched and was reared to maturity. I have now received from Mr. G. H. H. Brown, a Regional Government Agent (prior to independence known as District Commissioner) in the Rift Valley Region of Kenya, the description of a somewhat similar egg of this cuckoo. It is a very blunt oval and reckoned to be about 20–22 mm. by 17–18 mm. (but not precisely measured); the ground colour fairly light blue, densely freckled all over with medium and light brown, and closely resembling the eggs of the British Blackbird. The precise locality is Baragoi in the Samburu District, an area of open, treeless plains of grass and small bushes, intersected by watercourses lined with several species of acacia thorn-trees and *Ficus*. The Red-chested Cuckoo is not uncommonly heard calling along these watercourses. The egg was found on 20th December 1963 at a time of the year when the rising sun comes over the horizon at 0645; it was laid between 0700 and 0715. The nest tree was a small 15 feet high acacia, in fresh leaf, within 20 feet of a Government Rest House. The cuckoo suddenly commenced to call a few minutes before 0700, and at such short range the repeated call was “quite deafening”. Peering into the tree, Brown saw a Red-chested Cuckoo sitting on a small nest and when he moved a little closer to get a better view a small shrike—not identified as the sun was in his eyes—almost certainly a *Tchagra*—flew out of the nearby leafy branches, but was only in view for an instant. The nest was a typical *Tchagra* nest. As